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*Journal of Consumer Culture* 2006 6: 116

DOI: 10.1177/1469540506062722

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# Journal of Consumer Culture

ARTICLE

## Culture Jamming

A Sociological Perspective

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*Abstract.* 'Culture jamming' is defined as 'an organized, social activist effort that aims to counter the bombardment of consumption-oriented messages in the mass media' (Handelman and Kozinets, 2004: n.p.). This article seeks to understand culture jamming from a sociological perspective, situating it in the 'expressivist' tradition, which originates with the mid-18th century thinker Rousseau and whose legacy extends to postwar Western counterculture. Culture jamming is seen as an investigation into the apparatus of representation in late modernity, as it relates to both images and discourses of the media and commodity system, and the expression of political will. By providing an incentive for producers to respond to consumer demands for environmental sustainability and an end to labor exploitation, culture jamming may ironically help rehabilitate the market system it often portends to transcend. This may indeed serve to ameliorate certain 'market failures' of the global system.

*Key words*

consumer resistance • culture jamming • 'hactivism' • social marketing • social movements • the expressivist turn

## INTRODUCTION

*Fieldnote, Monday, 10 May 2004, 11:54 a.m.*

I'm walking down Fifth Avenue from the New York Public Library on my way back to the New School. Ahead, I see a guy standing in front of the Duane Reade drugstore on the

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Vol 6(1): 116–138 1469-5405 [DOI: 10.1177/1469540506062722]  
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northeast corner of 34th Street, across from the Empire State Building. He's handing out plastic bags to passersby who mechanically grab them as they hurry to make the light before it changes. From a distance, I notice the familiar red and blue interlocking 'DR' of the pharmacy chain's logo, and presume the store has a street promotion going on. I come up to the corner, take my bag, and keep walking across the street, not making eye contact with the person handing it to me. I look down at my hand and notice that the 'DR' isn't a 'DR' at all, but a 'DG'. Underneath the letters, it reads not 'Duane Reade' but 'Dwayne Greed'. And underneath that it reads 'New York's Greediest Employer'.

It turns out the action on the street is a 'culture jam', the appropriation of a brand identity or advertising for subversive, often political, intent. In this case, the 'jamming' is being done by the Retail, Wholesale, & Chain Store/Food Employees Union (RWCSFEU) Local 338. Inside the bag is information about how Duane Reade exploits its employees, overcharges its customers, and otherwise acts disreputably.

Inspired by the technique of electronically interfering with broadcast signals for military or political purposes, the term 'culture jamming' is believed to have been coined in 1984 by the West Coast-based performance/activist group Negativland to describe a variety of activities (Dery, 1993; Klein, 2000; Morris, 2001). These include such tactics as the alteration of corporate advertisements by the Billboard Liberation Front, the parody of corporate and nongovernmental organization (NGO) websites by the Yes Men, and the appropriation of consumer goods through shoplifting and rebranding by Yomango. Much of this activity is chronicled in the magazine *Adbusters*, published in Vancouver, British Columbia, and on various websites such as the Culture Jamming Encyclopedia at Sniggle.net. The ability of culture jammers to imitate and satirize commercial messages is facilitated in part by the desktop publishing hardware and software readily available to consumers at relatively modest prices when compared to the capital-intensive technologies of other forms of media production, such as print and broadcast. The internet is another important digital tool for sharing images and information, and it should come as no surprise then that culture jamming, properly named, first emerged in San Francisco, near Silicon Valley, and the Pacific Northwest, home of Microsoft.

While much has been written about culture jamming from a journalistic perspective, sociological analysis has been limited.<sup>1</sup> To help remedy the situation, this article situates culture jamming squarely in the tradition of the 'expressivist turn', the subjective rejoinder to the instrumental rationality of scientific objectivism within what Taylor (1989) terms 'radical Enlightenment'. Its heritage originates in the mid-18th century with Rousseau, is then taken up by the German and English Romantic Movements, and continues on into such phenomena as American transcendentalism, the European avant-garde, and postwar Western counterculture.

Principles of subjective authority embedded in the expressivist tradition permeate culture jamming. These principles are revealed by examining culture jamming through the categories of culture, media, and social movements. In the area of culture, culture jamming aligns with the expressivist quest for authenticity, historically articulated through notions of the natural as it relates to the objective world and of originality with respect to the subjective under late modernity, a social condition Giddens (1991) characterizes as highly mediated and consumerist in orientation. In terms of media, culture jamming endeavors to achieve transparency, that is, to mitigate the asymmetrical effects of power and other distortions in the communications apparatus, cutting through the clutter as it were to clarify otherwise obscured meaning. In this respect, it relates to the culture industry critique of Frankfurt School thinkers Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944]1996) and their intellectual heir Habermas ([1962]1989, 1984), as well as to the social analyses of media pervasiveness undertaken by Debord ([1967]1995) and Baudrillard (1981), all of whom in some sense cultivate fields originally sowed by Rousseau. In terms of social movements, culture jamming may be seen as making a claim of democratic sovereignty relative to the social contract, engaging in the 'life politics' (Giddens, 1991) of self-determination in the face of an evolving global capitalist system (Sklair, 1991, 2001).

The roots of modern consumerism in Romantic expressive subjectivity are widely recognized, and these readings usually proceed by counterposing the emotional release of acts of consumption to the cold calculation of rational capital accumulation (Campbell, 1989; Miller, 1998; Slater, 1997). That expressive individualism has fueled new consumption patterns in the wake of critiques of the 'other-directed' conformity of mass society initially mounted in the 1950s by Riesman (1950), Mills (1951) and others has also been noted (Bellah et al., 1985; Carducci, 2004; Frank, 1997; Holt, 2002). That so-called oppositional or 'counter' culture can quickly be recuperated by commercial interests and integrated back into the market system is another often-explored notion (Goldman and Papson, 1998;

Heath and Potter, 2004; Hebdige, 1979[1988]). Indeed, a number of commentators see culture jamming's attempt to contest consumer society as ironically offering new sources of distinction for stoking the fires of consumer desire (Heath and Potter, 2004; Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002; Morris, 2001, see also Klein, 2000: 422–37). Yet by providing an incentive for producers to respond to socially responsible demands for sustainability of the environment through 'green' products and an end to labor exploitation through fair trade and anti-sweatshop production and distribution, culture jammers may in fact be performing a beneficial and some might even say necessary function as a consumer avant-garde (Klein, 2000; Lasn, 1999). From this perspective, culture jamming is an ad hoc form of social marketing (Kotler and Roberto, 1989); a way of advocating for change in mindset and behavior.

### THE CULTURE IN CULTURE JAMMING

Culture jamming is also known as 'semiological' (Dery, 1993) or 'meme' (Lasn, 1999) warfare, a contest over meanings and forms of representation, particularly as propagated in society through various media of communication. Hence a brief etymology of the concept of culture is useful in understanding the terrain upon which culture jamming maneuvers. According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn, the modern use of the word culture can be traced to the mid-18th century (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952: 145). Its Latin root forms such words as *cultura*: cultivation; *culter*: knife or plowshare; *cultor*: planter and also worshipper of the gods (hence the English word 'cult'), all of which are associated with nature and the earth. The term first became generally used in German and then spread to other European languages (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952: 145). English and the other Romance languages had long used forms of the word civilization to mean 'social cultivation, improvement, refinement, or progress' (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952: 145). The Latin root of civilization forms words such as *civis*: citizen, townsman; and *civitas*: state, citizenship, city-state – concepts associated with society and urbanity in particular.

While the word *kultur* first appears to have come into use in Germany, it is in France that evidence of the epic dialectical battle between it and *civilise*: civilization, initially emerged. By 1750, Kroeber and Kluckhohn note, the idea of progress, i.e. modernity, had been established – its basis, enlightened human reason, i.e., objective rationality, was also acknowledged (1952: 145). It was in that year that Rousseau fired the opening salvos of the expressivist riposte against instrumental reason with the publication of the *Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences*, also known as the

*First Discourse* (1750, 1753[1969]). In it, Rousseau argues that civilization, ingrained in the formal pedagogies of European academies and the overly mannered rituals of its social institutions, corrupts humankind. Against the detached view of external nature proposed by radical Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke, Rousseau asserts 'the inner voice' as the primary point of entry into the experiential world (Taylor, 1989: 370). By the close of the 18th century, German Romantics, notably Goethe, Herder, and Schiller took up Rousseau's mantle (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952; Taylor, 1989), setting up culture as the moral, the natural, that which emanates from within, against civilization as the outwardly 'proper', the artificial, that which can be applied onto the surface like a cosmetic. Romanticism quickly spread throughout Europe, privileging intuition over rationality, emotions over logic, and creative imagination over formal education.

The dichotomy between culture and civilization has run through social theory (indeed much of Western thought) for some two-and-a-half centuries (Taylor, 1989). It echoes in the early libertarian and abolitionist movements and in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman (Goffman and Joy, 2005). It can be discerned in the anthropological writings of the early Marx (1978), particularly in the concepts of alienated labor and private property inspired by Rousseau's *Second Discourse* on the origins of inequality (1750, 1753[1969]). Kant's dialectics of the sublime and aesthetic judgment, particular and universal, intuition and concept, and Tönnies' (1912[1957]) distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (community and society) are other examples. When Horkheimer and Adorno speak of autonomous art and culture industry, they essentially speak of culture and civilization. When Habermas speaks of lifeworld and system, he essentially speaks of culture and civilization. Debord's society of the spectacle (1967[1995]) and the commodity-sign of Baudrillard (1981) are effects of civilization. Yet as Kroeber and Kluckhohn note, the social interaction of humans with one another, in other words, civilization, is always already a prerequisite of culture (1952: 155). In addition, more recent theoretical perspectives on the heterogeneity of the 'imagined worlds' of various global cultures (Appadurai, 1993) and the idea of simultaneously operative 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt, 2002) suggest the dialectic is overly reductive from an empirical standpoint. Nevertheless, the dichotomy, a bequest of the expressivist turn, is embedded in the concept of culture that culture jamming portends to jam, especially as it relates to the question of 'authenticity'.

What might be termed 'bad' culture, i.e., culture industry, system, spectacle, commodity-signs, and other progeny of *civilisé*, is artificial,

manipulative, 'engineered' (Holt, 2002). 'Good' culture, the province of *kultur*, on the other hand, is authentic, truthful and natural. Bad culture is managed from the top down; good culture is autochthonous, literally springing up from the earth itself. Earth-friendly and ergonomically designed products, organic foods and handcrafting all bear the mark of good culture authenticity. For example, the taste for natural fiber clothing that emerged in the early 1970s has been interpreted as a response to the perceived failure of social engineering represented by mass-produced synthetic fabrics (Schneider, 1994). The expressivist notion of good culture is apparent in the pronouncement by the founder and publisher of the culture jamming journal *Adbusters*, Kalle Lasn, that: 'Culture isn't created from the bottom up by the people anymore – it's fed to us top-down by corporations' (Lasn, 1999: 189). One theorist has gone so far as to construct a complete system of 'vegetarian capitalism' as a way of moving all of humankind down the food chain and closer to the earth (Boje, 2004). The rejection of civilization (which is to say bad culture) on a broad level underlies what Holt (2002) terms 'postmodern consumer culture', arguably having its wellspring in the counterculture of the Beats and hippies of the 1950s and 1960s, and adopting extreme forms of expressive individualism as guiding market principles (Frank, 1997; Heath and Potter, 2004).

According to Holt, 'Postmodern consumer culture was born, paradoxically, in the 1960s counterculture that opposed corporatism of all stripes' (Holt, 2002: 82). This was when consumers began to embrace consumption as an activity through which identity could be constructed autonomously, and therefore authentically. They began to reject brands that appeared too inflected with the coercive, manipulative attributes of cultural engineering (Holt, 2002: 87). On the other hand, brands that were perceived as more 'authentic' began to prevail. In the 1970s, for example, Nike captured the running shoe market by embracing a brand positioning of 'authentic athletic performance', gaining legitimacy first and foremost by the fact that all of the company's principals were runners, including one who had coached the 1964 USA Olympics men's track team (Carducci, 2003). The company also embraced a marketing strategy of selling rebellious self-reliance in the American transcendentalist tradition at a time when the cultural contradictions of mass-produced consumption and rationally administered institutional bureaucracies seemed to be most clearly revealed in rising indicators of social and economic upheaval (Carducci, 2004; Goldman and Papsen, 1998). The authenticity claims of producers in the postmodern consumer paradigm have in some measure provoked culture jamming as well as other forms of consumer resistance. The

'trouble' between consumers and brands, of which culture jamming is a manifestation, is in essence a renewal of the conflict between good and bad culture, *kultur* and *civilisé*: as consumers become more reflexive as to how branding, marketing, and advertising work from the top down in the consumption process, they are prompted to question the authenticity of producers' claims.

One of the conflicts in the postmodern consumer paradigm results from 'peeling away the brand veneer' (Holt, 2002: 86), an activity perhaps most effectively exploited by culture jammers and for which they are most well known. This refers to exposing the 'backstage' of the brand, i.e. examining production practices, environmental impacts, competitive strategies etc. to hold corporations accountable to their authenticity claims by measuring what they do against what they say. For example, through their seamless mirroring of the Dow Chemical Corporation website (at [www.dowethics.com](http://www.dowethics.com)), the Yes Men gained worldwide attention for successfully mounting the 'Bhopal Hoax', in which representatives of the culture jamming group were inadvertently invited by the BBC to speak on air in the capacity of Dow spokespersons on the anniversary of the chemical disaster in Bhopal, India. They used the occasion to announce that Dow was accepting responsibility on behalf of Union Carbide, now a subsidiary, and promising to make full restitution amounting to billions of US dollars (Deutsch, 2004). The point of this exercise was to highlight the alleged disparity between actual environmental responsibility performance and credit often taken by the company in presenting a favorable image to its various publics.

One of the prime ways brands operate in postmodern consumer culture is to enable consumers to express individual sovereignty through identities constructed by acquiring and displaying goods that convey information about them and their position within a constellation of social networks (Holt, 2002: 87; see also Baudrillard, 1981; Belk, 1988; Bourdieu, 1984; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979[1991]; Fournier, 1998). Sovereignty over brands requires the acquisition of considerable 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984), which takes the form of knowledge of various product universes and the positions of brands within their respective social, cultural and economic domains. With the increased microsegmentation of markets and consumer cohorts, the process has become increasingly burdensome for individuals to manage. One solution is the rise of cultural 'infomediaries', such as Martha Stewart, *Lucky* magazine, Zagat's entertainment surveys and the like, to filter the dizzying plethora of choices on offer (Holt, 2002: 87).



Ironically enough, the *Adbusters* magazine website functions as a kind of culture jammer's infomediary, providing links to products whose ostensible authenticity can be demonstrated at every level. One such product is the Blackspot sneaker made entirely from earth-friendly materials (including vegetarian leather), using non-exploitative union labor, and distributed only through 'non-corporate' independent footwear sales outlets (*Adbusters*, 2005). Citing Frank's study of the creative revolution in advertising, Holt notes that: 'Postmodern consumer culture produces the consumer as liberated' (2002: 88). Yet, as Kozinets's (2002) study of Burning Man (an anti-consumerist event that takes place each year in the Nevada desert) suggests, this 'emancipation' may be far more modest in reality than envisioned under the good culture ideal. To be sure, the accommodation by commerce to rebellious expressive individualism within the postmodern consumer paradigm takes place as a matter of course, as Heath and Potter (2004), among others, maintain.

Holt theorizes a 'post-postmodern' consumer environment, in which the cultivation of self enables consumers to actively participate in the creation of the products and brands they consume (2002: 87). Culture industry *bricoleurs*, post-postmodern consumers use commodity-signs as forms of individual expression, striving for authenticity through organic unity at every level of the process (Holt, 2002: 87). By exposing the inconsistencies on the producer side of the ledger, culture jammers may in fact be the avant-garde of the evolution of consumer society, encouraging producers to conform to new consumer expectations in order to garner sales, and thereby continuing the development of socially conscious production in Western capitalism, which has included the abolition of slavery beginning in the early 19th century in the British Empire and the introduction of the high wage/high output model of Fordism in America at the dawn of the 20th century. In this environment, commodity-signs attract consumers into forms of community not bounded by geography but by the social relationships they are able to sustain. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) term this relationship 'brand community'.

While brand communities are not bound by geographic constraints, they do exhibit other aspects of traditional community. According to Muniz and O'Guinn, these include: 'shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility' (2001: 412). The first entails 'consciousness of kind', that is, the shared perception of belonging to a particular group united by certain common attributes. The second encompasses formal and informal social practices and customs that embody and propagate meaning, value and solidarity as well as a sense of history among the group's current members and successors. The third entails the sense of

obligation and duty individuals feel toward one another and the community as a whole, although such sense is admittedly more specialized and narrowly defined than the moral reciprocity of traditional community (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001: 426). Muniz and O'Guinn also note that while members of a brand community by definition feel a connection with the particular brand that unites them, their sense of connection with one another is even stronger (2001: 418). That the hypothetically anti-consumerist cadre of culture jammers can constitute a brand community is a plausible if seemingly paradoxical contention. In this regard, the readers of the culture jammers' journal *Adbusters* are a relevant case study.

The self-proclaimed 'Journal of the Mental Environment', *Adbusters* magazine does not accept paid advertising, exhibiting a sense of moral responsibility to its anti-corporatist constituency. Instead, the magazine's pages are filled with articles, artwork, and 'subvertising' (parodies of the ads of global brands such as Nike, Calvin Klein and Marlboro). *Adbusters* magazine and Media Foundation also promote ritual activities, like the annual worldwide 'Buy Nothing Day', and the organization of local culture jamming networks around the globe. The magazine's editorial position is anti-consumerist and earth-friendly; deliberate articulations of its readers' sense of shared consciousness. (The opportunity to align consumer power and worker interest sometimes gets overlooked in this formulation.) The market for *Adbusters* responds to the dramatic increase in advertising clutter permeating the public and private spheres – the number of messages the average person sees in a day is believed to have doubled by the mid-1990s over the previous 10-year period (Rumbo, 2002: 126). The sense of overload and expressive release as cause and effect can be seen in the statement by Carly Stasko, a Toronto-based culture jammer:

The culture jamming for me is like breathing. If you never exhaled, you'd suffocate. And yet we're supposed to just sit back and take in all the streaming commercials and television messages, and I'm supposed to take it and it's supposed to stay inside? No way! (Sharpe, 2001)

Yet a study of *Adbusters* magazine by Rumbo draws an important conclusion about the publication and the culture jamming phenomenon – the difficulty of mounting an entirely successful challenge to consumerism per se (1999: 124). *Adbusters* promotion of 'green' consumption and the simplicity or 'downshifting' movement have emerged as market segments in their own right as Heath and Potter (2004), Holt (2002), Kozinets (2002) and Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) observe. These new market segments have

attracted commercial interests to serve their wants and needs, making emancipation from the system of consumption elusive. *Adbusters'* own marketing efforts and product tie-ins for its 'Buy Nothing Day' anti-consumption event are themselves prodigious (Klein, 2000: 297). Witness also the Blackspot sneaker and subscriptions to the publication.

Culture jamming's strategy of disintermediating the perceived artificial effects of bad culture ironically opens new avenues of consumption through the pursuit of authenticity and the embrace of the natural. As Heath and Potter (2004) and Holt (2002) in particular demonstrate, but also Kozinets (2002), Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), and Rumbo (2002) suggest, resistance to one form of consumption often takes the form of another: what seems to offer respite from consumer society instead reinscribes it in a different and often more compelling way. If in late-modern society, absolute individual emancipation from societal constraint is seen as less and less viable when compared to earlier expressivist manifestations, it is in no small measure due to the recognition that 'the natural' is a construction of the social (itself the existential ground of human experience). Yet culture jamming does have the potential for ameliorating certain aspects of the global consumer marketplace. In this regard, Giddens' theorization of life politics, which does not seek emancipation but instead endeavors to connect the individual with global concerns (1991: 214), provides a useful avenue for analysis. To see how this might be so first requires a consideration of culture jamming from a media perspective.

### CULTURE JAMMING AS REMEDIATION

A related term for what is meant by the expressivist concept of *civilisé* or bad culture is ideology. Culture jamming as a media practice directly confronts the authority of corporate representation, which takes the form of certain words and images and their meanings circulating in the consumer marketplace and in society in general. Based on the Habermasian (1984) theory of communicative action, the Handleman and Kozinets definition of culture jamming cited in the abstract of this article presumes that distorted communication can be 'clarified', that the process of communication between sender and receiver can be rendered sufficiently transparent to enable the 'true' message to be revealed. The concepts of transparency and its opposite, distortion, are central to media theory. The functionalist model, for example, sees media as a neutral instrument for transmitting information (Crane, 1992). In Laswell's functionalist construct of media communications, 'Who says what to whom in what channel to what effect?' (cited in Tuchman, 1988: 606), distortion is the signal degradation that

occurs as messages travel through an intervening mechanism (i.e. a medium) from point of origin to point of reception, a problem that can ostensibly be corrected by fine tuning on either end.

In Marxist-influenced theories of media, including the culture industry critique of Horkheimer and Adorno, and its positive variant the theory of communicative action underlying Handelman and Kozinets' definition, distortion is a function of elites unilaterally transmitting their beliefs to audiences to serve the interests of class domination (Crane, 1992: 13). That false consciousness is manufactured and propagated through various forms of media under modern capitalism is fundamental to Horkheimer and Adorno's use of the term 'culture industry' in lieu of the terms 'mass' or 'popular culture', both of which convey a determinative sense of responsibility on the recipients' part (Adorno, 1967[1975]). The distorted nature of publicity (the management of public opinion made possible by the unequal access to centralized electronic media enjoyed by those in power) is key to understanding the structural transformation of the public sphere whereby the ability to achieve democratic consensus is severely diminished (Habermas, 1962[1989]). But from a media studies standpoint, Haug's (1982) critique of commodity aesthetics is perhaps the articulation of the culture industry thesis most applicable to culture jamming.

For Haug, brand names and other forms of symbolic capital in the commodity system constitute an 'aesthetic monopoly' over individual and group consciousness (Haug, 1982: 41). As with other critiques of bad culture (i.e. *civilisé*), Haug's argument posits the commodity aesthetic as a surface effect, in this case as a device used by capital to mask class relations in the fetish of the commodity-sign. For Haug, consumption provides an illusion of classlessness (1982: 103). True emancipation starts with personal awakening, a rediscovery of the authentic inner voice essentially in keeping with the expressivist tradition, and the rejection of the self-deception that commodity aesthetics requires to preserve existing property relations. Deconstructing the seemingly seamless text of the system of commodity-signs, peeling away the ideological cover that is the brand veneer, is, of course, one of culture jamming's primary objectives; although the resulting personal liberation is embraced in some quarters as an end in itself (Lasn, 1999: 168) and not as a step in the emergence of universal class consciousness, as Haug would espouse. Heath and Potter (2004) would more modestly, and no doubt from their perspective more realistically, argue that the quest for personal liberation as an end in itself is socially damaging in forestalling action toward more practical avenues of reform of the existing system. It is further important to recognize that the process extends

beyond just media messages, i.e. advertising and other forms of promotion, to the things themselves.

Goods have always had cultural significance beyond being simply tools of exploitation whose meanings are distorted by media (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979[1991]). They are themselves communications media in the sense that people consume to express themselves as well as to fulfill their needs (Indeed, Douglas and Isherwood argue that expression, in the form of display, *is* one of the needs goods satisfy). Brands are overt parts of the sign system of consumer culture. In postmodern consumer society, brands are said to represent a kind of authenticity; they are part of a consumer's self-identity, indications of a self-appointed claim (sometimes valid, sometimes not) to a certain position in the social system (Belk, 1988; Carducci, 2003; Fournier, 1998; Holt, 2002). Brands reveal the dual nature of goods as bearers of commercial ideology, agents of social control, and as autonomous forms of expression, things used to construct personal and social meaning (Lee, 1993: 39). In as much as branded goods fail to represent the truth, culture jamming provides feedback, which as certain studies assert, effectively remediates the system of consumption and the communications mechanism through which it operates (Frank, 1999; Holt, 2002; Kozinets, 2002).

Culture jamming is thus in some sense related to the hacker ethos, the value system of computer programmers, under the influence of dot-com libertarianism, that calls for ensuring the smooth and efficient operation of processing code through a procedure open for all to see and participate in. The affinity between media transparency in the theory of communicative action and 'open-source' computer programming ultimately stems from the subjective authority embodied in the expressivist tradition, that meaning and the means through which it is conveyed are distinct and that the former constitutes the 'real' message. In the case of culture jamming, exposing the 'source code' of commodity aesthetics, what Holt means by 'peeling away the brand veneer' (2002: 86), is an attempt to get at the authentic nature of goods in order to pass sovereign judgment over them. This transcends traditional advertising media, which have been adapted to the new consumer environment.

In fact, one of the recuperations undertaken as part of postmodern consumer culture's rejection of cultural engineering is the assimilation of skepticism toward advertising not just in terms of content but in terms of its very form. Word-of-mouth (Rosen, 2000), viral, one-to-one, and 'gonzo' (Locke, 2001) are just a few of the names given to new marketing practices that seek to ostensibly disintermediate the relationship between

consumers and products. All recognize the suspension of disbelief among consumers as to the authenticity of commercial messages delivered via the mass media. One of the more recent influential theories of branding (Reis and Reis, 2002) is based on the thesis that advertising is no longer capable of establishing brand equity in the marketplace, a function now best achieved by the more 'believable' medium of public relations. More radical forms (Locke, 2001) portray the only viable marketing solutions as being essentially forms of social marketing (Kotler and Roberto, 1989), ways of promoting 'the good' by promoting the right goods to the right people in the right way. These efforts strive for the 'authentic voice' of the product or company to be heard (Locke, 2001: 198). And as for its part in that conversation, culture jamming attempts a kind of discourse analysis of just exactly who is speaking.

In an often-cited passage from *The World of Goods*, Douglas and Isherwood assert: 'Goods are neutral, their uses are social' (1979[1991]: 12). Hebdige (1979[1988]) initially used a form of the reception theory developed by the Birmingham School of cultural studies to assert that punks, skinheads and other rebellious youth subcultures appropriate certain consumer goods to construct autonomous identities, inscribing new, oppositional meanings onto them. However, he later revised his position to acknowledge the power of commercial culture to reintegrate counter-hegemonic styles into the system of consensus. This ongoing contest of meaning is a primary front in the 'semiological warfare' culture jamming engages in (Dery, 1993). That the 'meme wars' (Lasn, 1999) between counterculture and the so-called mainstream have been integrated into post-modern consumer society in a kind of masquerade under which the fashion cycle continually renews itself has been remarked upon by both culture jamming's proponents and its critics (Heath and Potter, 2004; Klein, 2000). But in any event, culture jamming questions the ostensible neutrality of goods in the process.

*The World of Goods* was first published in 1979, in the rising tide of informational society. This was the time when brands started moving from inside clothes to the outside, when the semiotic function of consumer goods came to more blatantly represent commercial interests. It was also when the disaggregation of mass-industrial production, particularly in the apparel industry, started ramping up (Gereffi et al., 1994). One of the roles of branding in this moment was to direct attention onto the consuming self through expressions of individual sovereignty in the display of distinctive goods (Holt, 2002: 87). The paradoxes of production and consumption are apparent in one of the emblematic products of the period, designer

jeans, which responded to the countercultural desire for natural fibers, distinctive ornamentation, and form-fitting tailoring, all of which marked the consumer as an 'authentic' individual (Schneider, 1994). Yet behind this lay a production process, the regime of batch production, that mobilized vast new pools of low-wage labor in lesser-developed countries, exploited the natural resources of those countries, and helped to undermine the social democratic welfare state in the West through deindustrialization and the erosion of union power in such sectors as the American apparel industry (Gereffi et al., 1994). That the product was inextricably bound up in this process is undeniable. And it is at this level – i.e. in revealing relationships of production and consumption – that the potentially most effective forms of culture jamming appear to lie.

In his analysis of the evolving global system, Sklair identifies two primary dilemmas plaguing what he terms 'transnational capitalism': (1) the sustainability of the system from an ecological standpoint; and (2) growing class polarization within nations and between developed and developing nations (Sklair, 2001: 6–7). Sklair observes that transnational capitalism, and the environmental dangers and social inequality it is said to cause, can only be challenged by confronting all three of its contemporary foundations: transnational corporations, the transnational capitalist class, and what he terms the 'culture-ideology' of consumerism (2001: 297). Culture jamming as a media practice can be an effective technique in examining the third pillar, but it must do so at the service of collectivities capable of addressing the first two. That this is on the agenda of some culture jammers can be seen in the work of the Yes Men and the more traditional activists of the Dwyane Greed campaign. While culture jamming is admittedly fraught with contradictions, it does lend itself to certain methods of social amelioration.

### CULTURE JAMMING AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

In addition to its connotations as the iconographies and discourses of media analysis, the term representation has a political meaning relevant to understanding culture jamming from a sociological perspective. This too issues from the expressivist tradition in terms of the social contract. Handelman and Kozinets refer to culture jamming as an 'organized, social activist effort' rather than as a social movement per se (2004: n.p.). Morris calls it a 'movement of consumerist disruption and subversion', but emphasizes its 'media-based' element (2001: 27) rather than the social. It may be best to understand culture jamming as an expressive outlet, a social practice that has affinities with contemporary social movements, such as feminism and

environmentalism, surveyed by McAdams et al. in their review essay on the subject for Smelser's (ed.) *Handbook of Sociology* (1988). Like the other movements and activities they discuss, culture jamming is 'politics carried on by other means' (McAdams et al., 1988: 699), a claim of sovereignty for under-represented groups in the democratic political process.

That political engagement should find expression in unofficial channels such as culture and media has many precedents. Miller (in press) argues that popular culture, and consumption in particular, is where discontent has long been expressed in American society because 'ordinary Americans have few authorized political outlets for expressing their actual interests, for articulating their desires and aspirations.' In China, songs and ballads appeared during the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) as forms of protest against the abusive practices of Imperial government (Innis, 1950: 151). Pamphleteering and newsletters arose in the 1600s for distribution in the coffeehouses and salons of Europe as a counterpoint to the official *communiqués* of government, providing a check on state power and a voice in the public sphere for the rising bourgeoisie (Habermas, 1962[1989]; Innis, 1950). From the time of the Reformation to the present, visual-culture producers have used parody and satire as weapons of propaganda in the form of political cartoons. Culture jamming reflects a theory of culture as a site of political action, seeing consumer culture as a viable path to social change.

Two of Rousseau's more enduring legacies within the expressivist tradition are the concern for nature and the imperative of universal human rights (Taylor, 1989: 413–14). The first finds continued force in the ecological movement and the second in the fair trade/anti-sweatshop critique of the globalization process. When looked at broadly from an activist perspective, culture jamming seeks to galvanize attention to these two dilemmas. A good example is BehindTheLabel.org, which brings together union activists, religious organizations, and students to promote 'sweatfree communities' around the globe. One of its recent projects exposes the alleged union-busting practices of American Apparel, a maker of casual wear for the youth market that promotes itself to consumers as being socially responsible.

In September 2003, factory workers in Los Angeles began organizing a local of the garment industry union UNITE HERE to represent production employees of American Apparel, which markets itself as being 'sweatshop free' (BehindTheLabel.org, 2005). While workers did earn wages comparable to unionized shops, they did not have other benefits such as paid time off, seniority or access to affordable health care. UNITE HERE



and several workers filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board alleging illegal antiunion activities on the company's part, including threatening to shut down the plant. The awareness campaign of BehindTheLabel.org and UNITE HERE led American Apparel to settle the charges by posting a neutrality statement with regard to union-organizing activity, although the company's labor force has yet to be represented by a collective bargaining unit. Since the action, the company has come under further scrutiny for the highly sexualized imagery of its advertising and the alleged personal ethics of its founder, Dov Charney (Paul, 2005; Sauer, 2004). These new claims have prompted additional culture jamming efforts in the form of parody ads being posted around Los Angeles (McLaren, 2005).

Culture jamming promotes anti-consumerism as one of its main agenda items (Lasn, 1999). By calling for active resistance to certain forms of consumption, culture jamming can be seen as a form of consumer boycott. The most dramatic is *Adbusters*, previously discussed annual worldwide 'Buy Nothing Day'. In another example, activists in early 2005 circulated an email over the internet encouraging consumers to boycott the entire economy of the USA on 20 January 2005, the day of the presidential inauguration, in protest of the Iraq war through 'Not One Damn Dime Day' (*AlterNet*, 2005). Other boycott targets include Nike, Coca-Cola, Nestlé, and Starbucks.

Consumer boycotts are among the most frequently, if not *the* most frequently, used organizing techniques for those outside the conventional power structure (Friedman, 1999: 3). Their use as an alternate means of politics has historically been to achieve either economic or social justice, following in the expressivist tradition of the call for universal human rights. Economic boycotts are typically the concern of consumers, and social boycotts often the concern of minorities. Examples of economic justice boycotts include the protests against high meat prices during the Great Depression and coffee in the 1970s. The Depression also saw the 'Don't Buy from Where You Can't Work' social boycotts for equal employment opportunity for African-Americans. The celebrated bus boycotts of the 1950s were instrumental to the civil rights movement.

Most consumer boycotts have historically been directed against commodities, such as meat, grapes and coffee, and not specific brands (Friedman, 1999: 66). They have also tended to be more market-oriented, that is, directed to effecting change by attacking a target's sales revenues, giving economic leverage to those mounting the action. Contemporary consumer boycotts, on the other hand, tend to be more media-oriented,

seeking to have an effect by damaging the target's reputation (Friedman, 1999: 216). Friedman offers two reasons for the change: (1) the entry of more women into the workforce, especially since the 1970s, removing significant numbers from the pool of recruits available to staff picket lines; and (2) the fact that it is difficult to get people to stop buying products they desire, as evidenced by the failure in the 1990s of Operation PUSH's boycott of Nike to significantly affect sales in urban areas (Friedman, 1999: 216, 17, respectively). Another reason no doubt is the increased awareness and sensitivity on the part of companies as to the economic value of brands in the disaggregated commodity chain of production, in which investments in 'cultural capital' (advertising, design, brand identity etc.) have dramatically increased relative to often contracted-out manufacturing costs (Carducci, 2003; Gereffi et al., 1994).

Parodies of brand names and marketing slogans are among the primary and more effective tools used in organizing contemporary consumer boycotts (Friedman, 1999: 221). This semiotic jujitsu is the culture jammer's stock in trade and its efficacy can sometimes be striking. For example, CNN reported that the Yes Men's mounting of the Bhopal Hoax sent Dow Chemical's stock price down 4.24 percent in 23 minutes on the Frankfurt Exchange, causing the company to temporarily lose US\$2 billion in market value (CNN, 2004). (It recovered as news of the hoax became known and its stock price was relatively unaffected in other financial markets, but the negative publicity from the incident continues to circulate, especially over the internet.) Edward Herman asserts in a letter to the editor of *Adbusters* (cited in Morris, 2001: 27) that culture jamming is really only a tactic, not an end in itself for effecting social change, especially in terms of ameliorating the dilemmas of late-modern capitalism. And there is unquestionably a need to distinguish between culture jamming as an organized action perceived as an end in itself, and as an instrument of political action used by more conventionally defined social movements, such as labor and animal rights activists.

McAdams et al. define social movements broadly as having members, a network of communications, and leaders (1988: 715). Additional factors in understanding social movements include the mobilization of resources and the implementation of political processes, in other words, how well constituencies and capabilities are activated and associations created as mechanisms for taking action (McAdams et al., 1988: 697). Social movements at their highest organizational level claim to speak on behalf of constituencies and seek to influence policy (McAdams et al., 1988: 717). Their process is one of 'frame alignment' (McAdams et al., 1988: 713),

bringing social action and worldview together to ameliorate relative deprivation and institutionalize a new paradigm. Social movements, if they persist over time, can evolve into enterprises, like the NAACP or the ACLU. By all of these measures, the community of culture jammers around *Adbusters* magazine and Media Foundation can be considered at least a faction of a social movement, if perhaps not always an ultimately effective one in and of itself.

*Adbusters'* subscriber base, regular newsstand purchasers, and online communities constitute a membership of a kind. The magazine itself and the extended media of websites, listservs, discussion groups, and the like is a multidimensional communications network. Leadership is exhibited (for better or worse) by Lasn and other paid staff. Other less commercially visible groups also appear to meet the criteria, such as the bloggers who maintain the Culture Jamming Encyclopedia on Sniggle.net and the contributors to such alternative news and information portals as IndyMedia.org. Not unlike other consumer groups and special-interest organizations, *Adbusters* claims to speak for the consuming public at large. Besides seeking to affect corporate policies through negative publicity and product boycotts (as well as their opposite action, 'buycotts', i.e., the patronizing of approved products), *Adbusters* magazine and Media Foundation have sought to influence public policy through legal action and other advocacies against American and Canadian regulatory agencies and for-profit companies on freedom of speech issues, in particular those related to the placement of anti-advertising messages (Lasn, 1999: 192–9).

Social movements are traditionally perceived to respond to situations of relative deprivation; however, McAdams et al. note that a general condition of prosperity seems to be connected to a rise in social-movement activity (1988: 702). According to their analysis, some level of wealth provides favorable conditions for collective activity, including the ability to raise funds to support communications and community building, thereby creating opportunities for 'entrepreneurs of grievances' (McAdams et al., 1988: 702). Also, concentrations of youth and the absence of 'cross-cutting solidarities' are other conditions that facilitate the rise of social movements. It is not surprising then to see culture jamming, properly called, first emerge in San Francisco (home of Negativland, the Billboard Liberation Front, the original Burning Man festival, and Silicon Valley) and the Pacific Northwest (home of *Adbusters*, Nike, and Microsoft) and then spread to college campuses, areas where both highly transitory youth and comparative affluence are concentrated. It is further worth noting that the rise of such alternative marketing techniques as 'gonzo', word-of-mouth, viral, etc.,

which also make a claim to rebellious authenticity, evolved out of networked online environments operating from those same locales awash in venture capital, where considerations of return on investment, even those as nebulous as measuring the effectiveness of conventional advertising, were considered irrelevant during the heady days of the dot-com boom.

Social movements are not simply aggregations of individuals but 'collectivities' (McAdams et al., 1988: 709). They constitute an intermediate level of organization between individuals and the macrosocial contexts within which they live. Among the macrolevel factors culture jamming attempts to remediate are the plethora of commercial identities inserted into contemporary life, the pervasiveness of the culture industry, the seemingly all-encompassing spectacle of the commodity-sign (Baudrillard, 1981; Holt, 2002; Rumbo, 2002). The relative-deprivation model holds in this scenario in terms of the dual crises of relations of environmental sustainability and equitable exchange under late-modern capital and their masking by the universal call of consumption (Sklair, 2001: 2). Culture jamming provides a channel for sharing a feeling of sovereignty in consumer society, an environment within which knowledge of brands is a form of cultural capital and facility with them part of a habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 2002). Culture jamming then, can be seen as a movement, but also as a technique in the same way that cubism or dada are both movements in the history of, and techniques for making, art. Indeed, it has even been the subject of an art museum exhibition, 'The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere', mounted by the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in 2004. The question is one of consequences, intended or otherwise.

From this perspective, critiques of those such as Heath and Potter (2004), which see transcendent strategies of individual emancipation on a cultural level as serving to reinforce the very systems of control they mean to defy, are well taken. Culture jamming has the greatest potential to achieve a useful end as a means in service to larger movements rather than as an end in itself. Yet it must also be recognized that, taken on this level, culture jamming in fact serves to remedy certain 'market failures', to take a phrase from Heath and Potter's rational-choice lexicon, namely those of the instrumental reason that touched off the expressivist turn some two-and-a-half centuries ago and whose means-ends rationality cannot account for bonds of civility in society, the deeper meanings of human existence, and whose myopia in this respect has led to environmental destruction and exploitation around the globe.

## CONCLUSION

An analysis of culture jamming needs to supplement sociological examination with a consideration of its political and economic effects. To be truly effective as a cultural, media, and social practice, it appears that culture jamming must be tied to a larger purpose and not be taken as an end in itself. The most effective tendencies seem to be those that link with broader social concerns about global ecology and human rights. As a result of consumer activism, Nike, to take one example, now offers PVC-free products packaged in recycled boxes and has established a code of ethics for offshore suppliers. (Whether these initiatives are sincere, much less sufficient, is still open to debate.) But as the American Apparel and Operation PUSH efforts, noted above, suggest, affecting change on the consumer side of the market equation often has limited effect. Some producers have adapted and new producers have arisen to respond to post-postmodern consumer demands for environmentally sustainable, socially responsible goods. Sales of certified fair trade chocolate are growing, for instance, but remain trifling compared to total world consumption (Anti-Slavery International, 2004: 45).

Duane Reade still refuses to acknowledge its employees' desire to affiliate with RWCSFEU Local 338 and engage in collective bargaining, although the National Labor Relations Board has ordered the company to remedy its unfair labor practices and make full restitution to all employees and the union. The New York State Supreme Court in October 2004 also upheld the union's right to continue the 'Dwayne Greed' culture jam, noting that its factual allegations against the company were credible, not to mention protected as free speech under the First Amendment. Thus on the streets of New York City the jamming of culture continues, and every now and then flashes of the red-and-blue 'DG' logo can be seen on white plastic bags in the hands of rushing passersby.

## Note

1. In fact, a call for research on the subject, sent out last year over the sociology of consumption listerv by Dan Cook of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, returned hardly any response (personal communication, 30 October 2004).

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